

Windows On WRJ



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Torat Nashim: Speaking with Neil Yerman

A new Torah is created with great care, with special materials and according to Jewish tradition. WRJ has embarked on the Torat Nashim project, which will produce a new sefer Torah for use and display at WRJ Assemblies, District events and special Sisterhood celebrations. Artist and educator Neil Yerman "spoke" with the editors of Windows in fascinating, and often amusing, detail.

Q: How did you get started in this profession? What inspired you? How did you receive your training?

A: Ever since I was old enough to hold a crayon, I was a "scribbler." In school, in the earliest grades, I loved to write letters and words, as neatly, as beautifully as possible. If a child can have a passion, this was mine. As I got older, I developed as an artist but it was not until I was in my mid-thirties that I finally started to listen to people who were trying to guide me into a career in art.



Sofre Neil Yerman explained the process of creating a new sefer Torah at the 1998 WRJ Board of Directors meeting.

I was working as a commodity broker on Wall Street when my wife, Rabbi Jo David (not a rabbi then) brought home a large drawing board and said, "This is what you should be doing." Our rabbi, Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, who was then at Central Synagogue in New York, told me that I was good enough "to study" and encouraged me to work on my writing and drawing skills.

I began to do one-of-a kind pieces that combined calligraphy and illustration *ketubot*, invitations, birth announcements, and many, many invitation envelopes. Along the way, I met and was mentored by a number of different people who introduced me to various types of art restoration techniques, especially those relating to works on parchment, like antique *ketubot*. I began doing restoration work along with my original art.

In 1987, Rabbi Aaron Petuchowski, who was then at Temple Sinai in Roslyn, New York, asked me if I would be willing to look at their *sifrei* Torah to see if I might be able to assist in some repairs. The work on the initial scroll led to a two-year project that included some original writing as well. That was how I got started.

"...I spend a great deal of time every day writing with a feather and thinking about things that seem to have no connection with modern life."

Q: It seems like you live professionally between two worlds - the very ancient and the very modern. Is it a conflict? An inspiration?

A: What you're saying is that you look at me and see that most of the time I'm wearing a suit and look like any other businessman. I have to deal with modern life and the computer age, but I spend a great deal of time every day writing with a feather and thinking about things that seem to have no connection with modern life. One of the conflicts I deal with is that it seems like the entire world lives in cyberspace today, but I don't even know how to turn on our computer. I'm probably the first *sofer* in Jewish history to have a female rabbi managing his e-mail. I like the fact that I write with a feather and cut the quills myself. I get strength and energy by working in this ancient way. I also know that it is important to stay in touch with the modern world so that I can use modern language, events and references in my teaching. That's why I've invented the mythical program for scribes, Feathers '98!

Q: How would you describe your own personal Jewish practice?

A: Philosophically, I believe strongly in the Reform Movement's idea of informed choice. In addition, I feel that all of Jewish practice is potentially within the parameters of Reform Judaism. My personal practice includes the observance of Biblical *kashruth*, putting on *tefillin* and immersion in the *mikvah* as outlined for scribes.

Q: What do you like best and least about being a scribe?

A: I like being a facilitator or guide for those who wish to fulfill the 613th commandment, which is to write a *sefer* Torah. I love teaching those who are very young, and those who are very enthusiastic, no matter what age they are. What I like least is when the hot water pipes are not working at the mikvah in the middle of January!

Q: What do you do to prepare yourself spiritually to take on the work that you do?

A: I start as many mornings as possible by going to the *mikvah*. Before beginning to work, I always put on *tefillin* and pray. Many of my prayers are for the health, strength and well-being of my family and friends. I always pray that our lives may continue to be strengthened through Torah and connection with the Holy One. Before beginning the writing, there is a specific group of prayers that I say, including the ceremony for blotting out the name of Amalek.

Q: What happens if you make a mistake when writing the name of God?

A: Although there are certain exceptions with regard to several specific Divine names, in general, when a sacred name is misspelled, the entire piece of parchment on which it is written is considered *pasul* (ritually unacceptable.) It must be buried in a *genizah* (a depository for sacred writings too holy to be destroyed). An entire new piece of parchment must be written to replace it. The commonly held idea that if a mistake is made in the Torah, the scribe must begin again at the very beginning, is not true.

Q: How do you feel about creating the WRJ Torah?

A: I feel truly privileged to be part of this project. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time in history that a North American woman's organization has made such a hands-on commitment to Torah. It is exciting that Reform Jewish women all over North America will have the opportunity to participate. I see this as a real coming of age for the women in the Movement. By learning about Torah, participating in the actual writing and generating funds for the program, Reform women are making an important public statement about the importance of

Torah in the Reform Movement, and about the importance of Torah in the lives of modern Jewish women.

Q: How do you make the Torah relevant to modern Jews?

A: Although the words themselves are ancient, the meanings and interpretations are eternal and universal. The beauty of Torah is that it has always been modern for every generation and will, I am sure, continue to be so in the 21st century.

Q: Is the craft of writing a Torah in the modern age more or less difficult and meaningful than in times past?

A: Torah still has to be written one letter at a time, by hand, with a feather. That has not changed. However, technology has made writing a *sefer* Torah easier. For a price, computer checking of a Torah is now available and used by traditional *sofrim*. The scoring of the parchment, once done by hand, is also done by computer, which saves a great deal of time. Fax and E-mail make it possible to order parchment from abroad and receive a confirmation the same day. Air delivery makes it possible to get the parchment from Israel within a few days, instead of having to wait months while it is shipped by boat or camel.

In some ways, I think that writing a Torah today is more meaningful than it was even a few hundred years ago. We certainly have the technology to produce a Torah by computer, but we choose to maintain our traditions in this one special area of our Jewish lives. We could produce a Torah on a high quality archival paper, but we choose parchment so that the Torah will last as long as possible. At a time when it seems that much of society lives for the moment, we commit major financial resources to bringing a Torah into the world that is written more for the generations that will follow us than for ourselves. Today, secularism, rather than other religions, is the great danger to Jewish continuity. When a Reform community makes the religious choice to write a Torah scroll, it publicly demonstrates its faith in the enduring quality of our ancient heritage.

Your Role in Torat Nashim

"It is a *mitzvah* for every Jew to write a Torah scroll" -the 613th commandment from the *Book of Mitzvah* - is the foundation of an exciting project. WRJ is sponsoring the creation of a "women's Torah" -- Torat Nashim. Neil Yerman is "writing" it; and you, too can participate.

You and your Sisterhood can fulfill the *mitzvah* of writing a Torah with a pledge of \$18 (chai) or more. Use it to honor women, men and children on their *B'nai Mitzvah*; birthdays, anniversaries and other occasions, and to thank and recognize Sisterhood and congregation members for service to WRJ and Reform Judaism. For full information, contact Linda Cannon at (212) 650-4074 or send her a note at Lcannon@uahc.org and visit the Torat Nashim website.

You can visit Neil Yerman's website at <http://www.neilyerman.com>.



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Temple Shalom Writings

Our Holocaust Scroll

by Bruce E. Kahn

Dear Members of the Temple Shalom Family,

Recently, the parchment on our Holocaust scroll became separated from the Genesis or *B'rei'sheet* end of the stave (roller or *eitz chayim*). Upon learning of this, I called Rabbi Raphael Malka, a well-known *Sofer* (scribe) and *mo'hel* who lives in Kemp Mill.

He told me to bring the scroll over to his home immediately.

What an interesting place his home turned out to be. It is his workshop. Everywhere one turns one sees parchment for *mezuzot* and *sifrei-Torah* and *tefillin*. Tools for repairing holy objects and the objects themselves were placed alongside kits for performing ritual circumcisions, the *b'rit milah*. In the middle of one room sat a powerful computer, printer, and scanner.

Rabbi Malka checks for defects of the writing on parchment by scanning the contents of the parchment into the computer. He hits a button and every flaw in the scanned piece is highlighted on the screen. He hits another button and each error is magnified, filling the screen. The program identifies the type of error and how the letter or word should appear. What an amazing blend of ancient halachic and modern scientific processes appeared before my eyes!

The kind and gentle rabbi examined our Holocaust scroll. Trying not to hurt my feelings, he told me that the scroll is not kosher. I told him I knew that. There are too many letters on many of the lines and that is just one of many types of defects within this scroll.

Rabbi Malka then said that the scroll was purposely made *pesul*, not ritually fit. I said, "How do you know

that?" He answered that the consistency of the defects makes clear that this scroll was written as a *tikkun*, as a scroll from which to study in order to prepare to read from the kosher scrolls in the local synagogue.

Then he tells me that the scroll likely found its way to Bohemia in the former Czechoslovakia, after originating in Germany. I asked, "How do you know that?" He showed me the stitching connecting the leaves of parchment and said: "That is a German Jewish stitch." The German Jewish style of stitch made it easier to roll the scroll.

Then the good rabbi says: "The *sofer* was a *lamdan*, a student." I asked: "How do you know that?" He showed me the many different styles of writing in evidence in the scroll. "Here is the *ktav* (writing style) of *beit Yosef*, and here is *Ha' 'ri*." Then he showed me a mix of the two and on and on. A student who was taking the opportunity to practice each style of writing as he went along prepared this scroll.

Finally, Rabbi Malka told me that the scroll was at the very least 300 years old and perhaps as much as four hundred years old or more. I asked again: "How do you know that?" He told me the parchment was deerskin rather than from a sheep. He asked me to look at how in many places the parchment almost appeared transparent. He indicated that for a deerskin scroll to appear this way would take a minimum of 300 years. He then made some points about the wood of the *atsei chayini* (staves or rollers) to punctuate his assessment of the Torah's age. He said again, with emphasis, "This scroll is at the very least 300 years old."

Our Holocaust Scroll came to life somewhere between the late 1500s and the late 1600s. The scroll may have been well used by the time the Pilgrims reached Plymouth, before Jews settled in New Amsterdam under the prejudiced eye of Peter Stuyvesant, and certainly well before a colonist named Ben Franklin began to publish a collection of proverbs called *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

We have checked and there are no kosher Holocaust

Scrolls still available. Rabbi Malka told me that all the Holocaust Scrolls he has seen were also not kosher.

Technically, we should not use the scroll as we do. But, given its age; given its history and that the people who used it were murdered for doing so; given that it survived the implementation of the "final solution;" given its contents; I vote for us to continue to use it.

Let us give our b'nei mitzvah children the privilege of reading from this scroll, just as we have been doing at Temple Shalom since the 1960s, when Peter and Yvonne Wagner did so much to procure it for us.

Perhaps, more than ever, I consider Jewish children reading from this scroll to be a true, real, and significant act of redemption.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Bruce E. Kahn

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***COMPUTER SCANNING***

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As described in various sections of this site, no amount of caution is too great when it comes to inspection of Mezuzot. **In addition to the various methods of scrutinization employed by our highly trained and certified examiners, we offer computer scanning.** The STaM computer scanning system was developed by the Vaad Mishmereth STaM to be able to scan and examine almost all handwritings.

After the scribe carefully writes or inspects the scroll, the writing is double-checked for textual accuracy using computer scanning technology. The computer scans the Mezuzah for textual errors and may catch something the scribe, who is only human, overlooked. **This is an extra assurance of Kashrut, endorsed by the Vaad Mishmereth STaM as an effective additional method of inspection.**

It is hard to believe that computers catch almost 72% of Sifrei Torah with mistakes, even after careful examination by scribes! Although Mezuzot and Tefillin have a lower percentage of computer-caught mistakes, errors are found via the computer scanning process on almost a daily basis.

NOTE: Because the computer only seeks textual errors, once the text of a Mezuzah, Tefillin or Sefer-Torah has been computer-verified, it will no longer, in its lifetime, require additional computer scanning.

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